The Torch-Bearers

Arlo Bates

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THE

TORCH-BEARERS

ARLO BATES

[Delivered at the Centennial of the Incorporation of Bowdoin College, June 28, 1894]

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BOSTON
ROBERTS BROTHERS
1894

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University Press:
John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, U.S.A.

ONCE in this place I saw a poet stand,
In all the dignity of age, with hair
White as the foam on Androscoggin's falls;
And heard his silver voice over the hush
More eloquent than noisy plaudits say:
"O Cæsar, we who are about to die
Salute you!" While all those who listened knew
Fame had so crowned him that he still would live
When death had done its worst. To-day the grace
Lies in the high occasion, not the lay.
To-day we mark the rounded century,
And pause to say: "Our fathers have done well;
Let us take counsel what their sons may do."

At such a time, in such a place as this;
Here, where a melancholy whisper comes
From the thin breezes yearning toward sea;
Where wistful sighs of long remembrance stir
The bosom of the ever-murmuring pines;

Here, where a thousand varied memories
Rise up to waken pride or touch regret;
Where our lost youth lies wait and peers at us
As if some dryad shy peeped from her tree;
What word is fitting here and fitting now?

We find our hearts too full for lightsome speech.
The burden of the century which ends,
The burden of the ending century,
Together weigh upon us, and incite
To thoughts of grave and deep solemnity.
The empty babble of things idly said
By lip alone were insult to the time.
Not for a day like this are gleeful song
And amorous lay, — melodious nightingales
Fluting enchantment to the southern moon;
Gay mockery of life, like dancing foam
Flashing and crackling at the wine-cup's brim.
Not for a day like this regretful plaint
For all that has been, but, alas! is not.
Jocund bravado of high-thoughted youth

And bitterness of grief-acquainted age
Alike would jar. For, lo, here Duty waits
With finger on her lip, unsmiling, stern, —
And yet with eyes of passionate desire
Which yearn for that which is beyond all speech ;
Her mien austere, and yet her lofty look
An inspiration and a benison.

It is in Duty's name that one must speak,
Or let the silence prove more eloquent.

THE TORCH-BEARERS

I

ONCE on a night so dark it might have been
Ere God had yet commanded: "Be there light!"
When all the spirits of the dread unseen
Had burst their bonds, and joined rebellious fight,
I stood among the fisher-folk, and heard
The innumerable tumult of the storm sweep down,
Till the earth quivered, and the sea seemed stirred
To its remotest deeps, where they who drown
Sleep calm in water still as lucent stone.
The wind and wave were all commingled. Sea
And air were one. The beaten surf was blown
Like sand against our faces; mockingly
A million voices clamored in the dark,
Deriding human might. They who upheld

The flaring torches stood there gaunt and stark,
And fought for breath; while yet they stood unquelled, —
For there were boats at sea.
A woman lay
Face down along the sand, her brown hands clenched,
Her hair mixed with the drifted weed, while spray
And rain and icy sleet her garments drenched
And froze her as she lay and writhed. Her love
Was in the boats. His mother at her head
Crouched with white locks storm-torn; while bright above
The red glare by the flaring torches shed
Fell on white faces, wild with fear and pain,
Peering with eyes hand-shaded at the night
In vain endeavor some faint hope to gain.
But the black wall of darkness beat the light
Backward as from a block of ebony.

The spume and spray like snow-flakes whirling flew
Where the torch-bearers stood, half in the sea;
From every torch the flakes of red flame blew
Backward, as float the blood-stained tufts of down
Torn by an arrow from a fleeing bird.

The wind beat down the flame, the rain would drown;
Almost it seemed shrill voices might be heard
Crying against the beacon set to guide
The tempest's prey to safety. "Quench it!
Quench!"
The voices clamored; while the angry tide
Leaped on the bearers to drag down and drench
The saving flame. Yet none the less they held
Their bright, wind-beaten torches high
Amid the storm, and as it fiercer swelled
Flung out defiant hope to sea and sky.

II

Like those brave torch-bearers around whom foam
And wind-blown spray flew blindingly, to-day
Stands man upon these shores, refuge and home
Of Liberty, who fled in sore dismay
Across the seas, escaping lash and chain, —
The nameless tortures of the sullen East,
Where souls are thrown like dice and manhood
slain; —
The tyrannies of Europe, rack of priest
And knout of Tzar, the dungeon and the spy; —
The cunning craft of Bismarks, gluing up

With blood an empire ; — the infuriate cry
Of France, drunk both with blood and pleasure's cup ; —
England's supreme brutality, which leaps
To strike each weak, defenceless land, and leaves
Her bravest sons to die unsuccored ; keeps
Ireland in chains beneath her feet, and weaves
A net of tyrannies around the earth
Until the sun can never on them set.

Such things have been. Alas for man when birth
Means slavery !
Her snowy shoulders wet
With unstaunched blood, torn by the biting lash ;
Her wrists scarred with the gyves ; her pleading eyes
Piteous in wild entreaty ; bruise and gash
On her fair brow, — fled Liberty, with cries
Which startled to the stars with piercing dread.
Daring to draw our daily breath like men,
To walk beneath the sky with lifted head,
How should we know man's degradation when
His every heartbeat slackens with the fear
Of lash and chain, — life's meaning to the slave ?
It was from this fled Liberty, and here
She finds a refuge or she finds a grave.

For, O America, our country! Land
Hid in the west through centuries, till men
Through countless tyrannies could understand
The priceless worth of freedom, — once again
The world was new-created when thy shore
First knew the Pilgrim keels; that one last test
The race might make of manhood, nor give o'er
The strife with evil till it proved its best.
Thy true sons stand as torch-bearers, to hold
A guiding light. Here the last stand is made.
If we fail here, what new Columbus bold,
Steering brave prow through black seas unafraid,
Finds out a fresh land where man may abide
And freedom yet be saved? The whole round earth
Has seen the battle fought. Where shall men hide
From tyranny and wrong, where life have worth,
If here the cause succumb? If greed of gold
Or lust of power or falsehood triumph here,
The race is lost! A globe dispeopled, cold,
Rolled down the void a voiceless, lifeless sphere,
Were not so stamped by all which hope debars
As were this earth, plunging along through space
Conquered by evil, shamed among the stars,
Bearing a base, enslaved, dishonored race!

Here has the battle its last vantage ground;
Here all is won or here must all be lost;
Here freedom's trumpets one last rally sound;
Here to the breeze its blood-stained flag is tossed.
America, last hope of man and truth,
Thy name must through all coming ages be
The badge unspeakable of shame and ruth,
Or glorious pledge that man through truth is free.
This is thy destiny; the choice is thine
To lead all nations and outshine them all; —
But if thou failest, deeper shame is thine,
And none shall spare to mock thee in thy fall.

III

As when an avalanche among the hills
Shakes to their very base the mountains hoar
And with a din of vibrant voices fills
All air and sky, there answer to its roar
A hundred empty echoes, poor and thin,
So words come after deeds; so must words stand
For all that men hold holiest, all they win
By might of soul no less than strength of hand.

What generations desperately brave
Have fought through war and woe, through doubt and pain,
To break the bonds which make of man a slave;
How poor are words to gather up their gain!

We hear with even, hardly quickened breath
Or one poor thrill, freedom's supernal name;
The word our fathers cried in blood and death
Leaves but a dying echo, weak and tame.
We read the patriots' roll with hearts unmoved,
And count their deeds as old wives' tales grown stale;
The glorious fields in which their worth was proved
Grow thick with grass; heroic memories fail.

O men, sons of the world's one land left free,
What shall bring home to you the mighty truth, —
The burden of your sacred destiny,
The office which is yours in very sooth?
What word will make you feel that you must stand
Like those torch-bearers in the night and storm?
That mankind struggles desperate toward land, —
Lost, if your beacon-light do not inform

Their tempest-blinded eyes? Not yours to sit,
Sheltered and warm, and hear the gale sweep by
Unheeded. Let the blazing torch be lit,
And stand like heroes where the surf is high!
The night roars round us as if tempests cleft
The solid earth and made the heavens bow;
If now the torches fail, what hope is left, —
For never was more need of aid than now?

IV

Yet not alone from base indifference
Do her sons fail the land in her sore need.
Easy it were to arm in her defence,
And on the splendid fields of glory bleed.
The land lacks not sons at her call would die, —
It is a harder task for her to live!
And who may say which way duty doth lie?
Who tell what aid we to our land may give?
Lo! like the thunders by a prophet heard
Telling the things which future days shall see,
Far down the ages rolls the mighty word,
The voice of God: "The Truth shall make you free!"

The Truth! Not now we fight with sword and lance,
Nor yet with eager bullet swift for prey;
Strife is not fiercest now where foes advance
In ranks embattled, in mad zeal to slay.
Thus have men fought of old, and thus while life
Is made a pawn in the great game of fate
Men may fight on; but keener is the strife
Where bloodless triumphs upon victory wait.

When first rude savage brutes — but half aware
That they were men; feeling their doubtful way
To reason and to manhood, — chose some lair
Where crouched and huddled like wild wolves they lay,
They made him chief who beat them down and broke
Their pride with fear; — but if he did them wrong,
If he betrayed, their sullen rage awoke;
And stealing on him stretched in sleep along,
They slew him, — doing sacrifice to truth
By very treachery, in guiltless crime.

Oblivion-lost, dull generations, youth
And age melted together in the lapse of time,

Sped from the womb swift-footed to the tomb;
And learned of life and love a little, learned
Of death and hate how much! From out the gloom
Of those dim centuries, long since returned
To chaos whence they came, whatever gleam
Of light glances to sight is but the flare
Of sword or lance; or, if a brighter beam
Leap up a moment, 't is the dancing glare
Of blazing town, or pyre where in flame
Some warrior goes in fire to claim reward
For hardihood in battle. What was fame
But echo from the din of fight? Abhorred
Was he who dared name peace. All history
Is writ in blood and stained with battle-smoke;
While still that word: "THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE!"
Uncomprehended, down the ages spoke.

V

But what is truth? Wise sages long inurned
And countless generations craved it still
With unavailing passion, faith which yearned
In ecstasies of hope, and ardent will

Which stormed high heaven and groped in utmost deep.
Since time's first day the history of man
Has been this quest; and yet of all who sleep
In graves unnumbered how few won to scan
The open secret blazoned all around!
What far lands have been searched, what battles fought,
What stress of soul endured; yet men have found
It not! And found it not because they sought
For that which is not; thinking truth a thing,
Cold concrete fact, their very hands might touch,
To which their weakness, their despair might cling.

How could they know the truth, deeming it such?
How many ages needed man to learn
That that which changeless is may changeful show!
Alters the spherèd moon, although it turn
With varying phases to our eyes below?
Truth is not brought from far; it comes not fair
Like delvèd gold drudged darkling from the mine;
It breathes about us like the morning air;
For every eye its quenchless glories shine.

Wide as the light, truth is not formal creed,
Or fact or law or theory; it takes
A thousand shapes protean, now in deed
And now in doctrine, like a wave which breaks
Forever on the jagged rocks, and yet
Is never twice the same. A passing word
Holds it a moment, as a jewel set
In a king's signet if his hand be stirred
Kindles with sudden light then darkens straight; —
So with the word upon the very tongue
Sudden 't is false. Truth's trumpet tones elate
Awake to deeds such as the bards have sung, —
Then ere their echoes die the clear notes jar,
And harshest discords crash upon the ear;
Till that which has been truth from truth is far,
And they who fought in faith shrink back in fear.

How many noble souls in ages old
Have given life itself to testify
That that was true which now as false we hold;
Faiths which to-day discarded, trampled lie
Have been the war-cry thrilling hearts austere;
Legions have rushed their triumph to achieve,
And with their blood have written crimson-clear
Upon a hundred fields: "This we believe!"

From fallen truth to truth shall fall the race
  Goes ever forward. What to-day is true
To-morrow will be false, and in its place
  New creeds as frail will live their short day through.
Like bubbles on a flood, brief as a breath,
  Yet telling how the stream flows ceaselessly,
Truth's brave illusions have their birth and death,
  Immutable in mutability.
For truth is as a ray of light let fall
  Upon the sea, — for every wavelet bright
A different beam; the same for all
  And yet diverse in every mortal's sight.
It were as easy for a babe to reach
  And gather up the sunshine on the floor
As to enchain elusive truth in speech, —
  Though changeless yet evasive evermore.

VI

Who then shall know truth? Who the glory claims
  To feel his being kindle with its fire?
How amid falsehood's thousand dancing flames
  Know the pure spark of man's supreme desire?

Stand with thyself alone. Let mankind be
As if it were not. Question then thy soul:
"Say now what thou believest?" That for thee
Is truth the ultimate. The hoar stars roll
No surer in their orbits, firmly stayed
By unseen bonds of elemental force,
Than man's inmost integrity is swayed
By that which is of verity the source.

Eons through space and through eternity
The universe sweeps forward on its way; —
Whence, who shall say? While whither utterly
Is hid from knowledge as night hides the day.
Yet all men feel the current of its tide;
We know the push of unseen hands behind.
Man's earliest conscious thought barbaric tried
With groping speech a name for this to find,
And called it God or destiny or fate;
Weighing assurance by the weight of doubt;
Greater in faith because of fear more great;
Believing most what least man might search out.
To-day Doubt, with her sneering, chilling smile, —
She who destroys all faiths which time hath spared

As the weird sphinx with her entangling guile
Devoured them whom her riddle had ensnared ;
Doubt, who with her destructive finger breaks
Each gleaming bubble of fair fancy frail,
And of its iridescent beauty makes
A drop discolored, — laughs to scorn the tale
Of other days as fable void and vain.
Only one thing remains she may not reach ;
One thing which man can never doubt, though slain
All other verities the ages teach.
Conviction moves us still. What man believes
We reverence, whether we his faith may share
Or wonder how some wile his faith deceives.
We feel the truth, beyond all aware
That truth lies in sincerity, though shame
And ignorance have bred and folly mean, —
As fire is pure although its lambent flame
Feed on heaped foulness, festering and obscene.

On this rests all the faith of man in man ;
All brotherhood, all knowledge and all hope.
On this rests love. All human dealing scan,
Nor find the limits of its gracious scope !

Why is the martyr's name the highest crown
Which man may win, save that it proves him true
To that which speaks within? Lo, up and down
The wide, cold earth their influences renew
Courage and faith, till all true men thereat
Are steadfast in their turn, aroused thereby; —
Not for the thing which they believed, but that
They did believe, and dared for this to die!

See where a broken host, desperate and torn,
Reddened with blood as with the sunset's glow,
Sweeps down the field in one last charge forlorn,
Knowing their cause is lost, yet choosing so
To fling their lives up in the face of fate, —
Too resolute to fear, too great to grieve, —
Exultant thus their death to dedicate
To that which they through life might not achieve.
And all mankind shall honor them, — yea, all!
Though they fight in an evil cause, they fight
For truth who hold conviction firm; and fall
Martyrs for truth, and children of the light.

There was a morn when all Rome stood aghast.
Riven with a thunder-bolt from Jove on high

Yawned in the forum a chasm deep and vast
As hell itself might at the bottom lie.
Tumultuous terror through the city sped.
Mothers their babies clasped, and maids as pale
As lilies lightning-seared, fear-smitten fled
Up to the pillared temples, with wild wail
Crying to the immortal gods for aid.
Men whose undaunted might Rome boasted, now
Were weak as cowards, trembling and afraid.
The priests with smoking sacrifice and vow
Of hecatombs to the vexed deities
Strove to assuage heaven's wrath; until at last
The sullen oracle what would appease
Indignant Jove proclaimed: "Let there be cast
Into the gaping depth Rome's choicest thing."
Then rode young Mettus Curtius to the brink,
And reined his curd-white horse in act to spring.
"Lo, here," he cried; "can hoary wisdom think
Of aught in Rome more choice, to Rome more dear,
More precious in the sight of gods and men
Than Rome's young manhood?"
Down the chasm sheer
He leaped to death and glory; and again
The rifted forum trembled, while as wave

Whelms into wave, the abyss shuddering closed,
Gulfing with greedy maw the dauntless brave,
Forever deathless there in death reposed.
We count his faith but folly; yet every heart
Still at his deed must thrill, because he died
For that which he believed, and stands apart
By that supreme devotion sanctified.

Woe were it mole-blind man if truth for him
Meant vision piercing down eternity,
Solving creation's riddles far and dim,
The secret of infinity to see.
We scan the countless errors of the past
And know them false, yet these were very proof
Of mankind's truth. Brave hearts have held them fast,
And given life itself in their behoof.
Even at the very mouth of error's den
Will singleness of soul build truth a shrine;
Truth's lily flowers, star-white, in falsehood's fen;
Sincerity makes even doubt divine.

See where Niagara majestic pours
Its flood stupendous down the precipice,

And from its thousand throats Titanic roars
Shoutings which quiver through the wide abyss. —
Seek not truth's image there; but look below
Where wild the whirling, seething Rapids rush,
Striving in wrath and tumult to and fro,
Wave smiting wave as rocks together crush,
Force battling force in Nature's feud supreme,
Confusion infinite, uncurbable; —
While underneath the turmoil still the stream
Makes ever seaward; undisturbable
The law which urges on. Each jarring wave,
Each boiling whirlpool, while it seems to stay,
Yet helps the river onward; floods that rave,
Current and eddy, all one law obey.
Thus truth goes forward. Every thought sincere,
Conviction's every word and every deed, —
Although they seem to hinder, and appear
As counter-currents, — every passing creed,
Each noble error where the soul is true
Though human weakness blind poor human sight, —
Helps the truth onward. Be our glimpses few
Of that great tide which to some ocean bright
Flows on forever; be its surface vexed
With turmoils infinite; hidden by spray

And foam and spume; its channels all perplexed, —
Yet be thou sure nothing its course can stay.

What man believes is truth. To this alone
The ages cling. The greedy hand of time
Steals all but this. From origin unknown
To destiny unknown moves man, sublime
In this alone, that he forever dwells,
If so he will, with inmost being lit
By truth's clear light divine, which ever wells
From the deep glories of the infinite.

VII

Such then is truth, and truth shall make man free.

Strong is that land whose every son is true
To the clear flame of his integrity.
Strong any land, though armèd guards be few,
Poor her defences, weak her armament,
Whose sons no higher good than truth conceive;
But, each in his own sphere, remain unbent,
Unswerved from that which they at heart believe.

Mighty that nation, bless'd among the lands,
Whose sons think first of country, last of self; —
Woe were a state where men stretch greedy hands
Grasping for place, and palms that itch for pelf;
Whose senates have become a market-place
Where laws are to the highest bidder sold;
Where only honesty secures disgrace,
And honor has no measure save hard gold;
Where parties claim the people's sufferance
Not for their virtue but for foe's misdeed;
Where public trusts from shame to shame advance,
And faction vies with faction in its greed;
Where pledges are like balls which jugglers toss;
Where no abuse of place can pass belief;
Where patriotism means — profit and loss;
And one scarce knows a statesman from a thief!

Shall our land come to this? Is such the end
Of all our fathers' loss and toil divine?
Their burning hope, their faith which could transcend
All doubt and present agony; resign
All that the flesh holds dear, counting it naught
If thus they might to their own souls be true;

If thus new freedom for the race be bought;
And truth its mighty kingdom here renew?
Shall our land ever come to this, — our state,
The last hope of mankind? Shall it betray
The high trust of its destiny, — ingrate,
The mock of all the earth, shame of the day,
Stained with disgrace too deep for night to hide?
Shall our loud-sounding boasts of freedom, made
To all the globe; the vows of swelling pride
Flung in the face of man and heaven, fade
Like wreaths of smoke?
Forbid it all the roll
Of patriots who have died to make us free;
Forbid it, martyrs, great and stern of soul,
White as Sir Galahad in integrity;
Forbid it, noble forefathers, who gave
Life and all life's best boons of love and peace
In high-souled manhood, this one land to save
For its great destiny, lest freedom cease,
And mankind's hope be lost!
Forbid it, ye
On whom the burden lies; ye, by whose voice
Is made the choice of leaders, — yours to see
That these be men to make the truth rejoice.

Not statesmen, dazzling with shrewd eloquence,
Not politicians, weaving cunning snares,
Not even knaves who claim omnipotence
For bank-accounts, — self-damning unawares! —
Can shape the destiny of this free land.
They are the hands, but back of them there lies
The great will of the people. All shall stand,
All fall by this, whatever chance arise.
However cunning tricksters may befool,
Or crafty schemers turn the law aside;
However leaders eloquent may rule,
Or generous statesmen strive for good to guide;
It is the people's will which must be done.
The schemer fears it as a slave the lash;
Power circles round it as earth round the sun;
It is the last appeal when factions clash.
It is your will, men of America,
Which yonder in the senate-house is wrought;
It is your will, and if anathema
Be its desert, upon yourselves 't is brought.
Your will is law; and if you stand aloof,
Idle in indolent indifference
When shame and evil put the land to proof,
Where shall our country look for her defence?

It is from your conviction must be born
The truth which makes the nation nobly free.
Though night should mock the very hope of morn,
Hold high the torch of your integrity!
Speak from your very souls, and be not stilled
By plea of party or by greed of gain; —
Freedom was ne'er by honest error killed;
By falsity alone can it be slain.
The chain has strength of its least link alone;
One loosened sod the avalanche lets slip;
The arch falls crashing through one crumbling stone;
One traitor mars the goodliest fellowship.
That land alone is safe whose every son
Is true to his own faith and cannot fail;
Where men cannot be trusted one by one
Little appeals to all shall have avail!
Be not beguiled by busy theorists
Who would upon the state all burdens lay.
The state but subject to men's will exists,
Is wise or weak, is true or false, as they.
It is in self-hood which makes man divine
The strength of nations lies. No liberty
Can be where men are but a mass supine;
Each must be true or all cannot be free.

Far off in the old misty Norseland sang
A bard heroic ere the Viking prow
Had found out Vinland; and his song, which rang
Above the clang of swords, avails us now.
"Thyself thyself direct!" the old bard cried.
The inspiration of that high word still
Thrills through us. Thrust all meaner guides aside
And follow thy best self. Thy good and ill
Lie in thine own sure keeping. For the land
And for thyself thou art thyself as fate.
No other man can do thy part; none stand
An instant in thy place or soon or late.
Thine own soul be thy judge to prove thy worth,
To try thy deeds by thy conviction's law; —
And what were all the glories of the earth
If this tribunal dread find blame or flaw!
Though plaudits of the nations to the skies
Proclaim thee great, if thou art small and mean
How canst thou deck thy shame in such disguise
That by thyself thy baseness be not seen?
What though thy virtues choke the trump of fame
If thou shouldst know them false? Better despite
And burning infamy and bitter blame
Than praise unmerited. Better the blight

Of all men's censure undeserved than one
Quick taunt of self, — for what man is is all.
Only the truth can matter; and undone
Is he who for the shadow shall let fall
The substance.
Yet, though self-hood be supreme,
The lowest deep to which man's soul is led
Is selfishness. Thyself from self redeem.
The man who lives for self alone is dead.
Better St. Simeon Stylites, caged
Upon his narrow pillar, than the man
With his own petty cares alone engaged.
Not such shall save the land; but they who scan
The broad horizon of humanity,
Asking their very souls what they may do
To help men on and up. They are most free
Who most for others dare to self be true.
Speak out by action thy soul's deep belief;
Be true to all by faith to thine own sooth;
Amid whatever night of doubt and grief
Hold high the ever-blazing torch of truth!

Men of our college, gathered here to-day,
If this be an hard saying; if I seem
Too much to play the preacher, let the word
Or stand or fall as it to you is true.
To-day the land has bitter need of us.
Across the sea what myriads swarming come
From the dark pestilential dens which reek
With all the Old World's foulness. Those to whom
Knowledge is given stand in double trust,
Guardians of liberty and of the right.
No man can flee responsibility,
Which surely as his shadow to him clings.
Ye are the torch-bearers; stand firm, stand staunch.
Light all the coming new-born century
With splendid blazon in the name of truth!

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